

THE RETURN

A CHRISTMAS STUDY



BY

ALLAN PEARSON SHATFORD

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LP
PS8537
H28K3

Canada Council / English Dept

Bernard Aukmann, May 1967.

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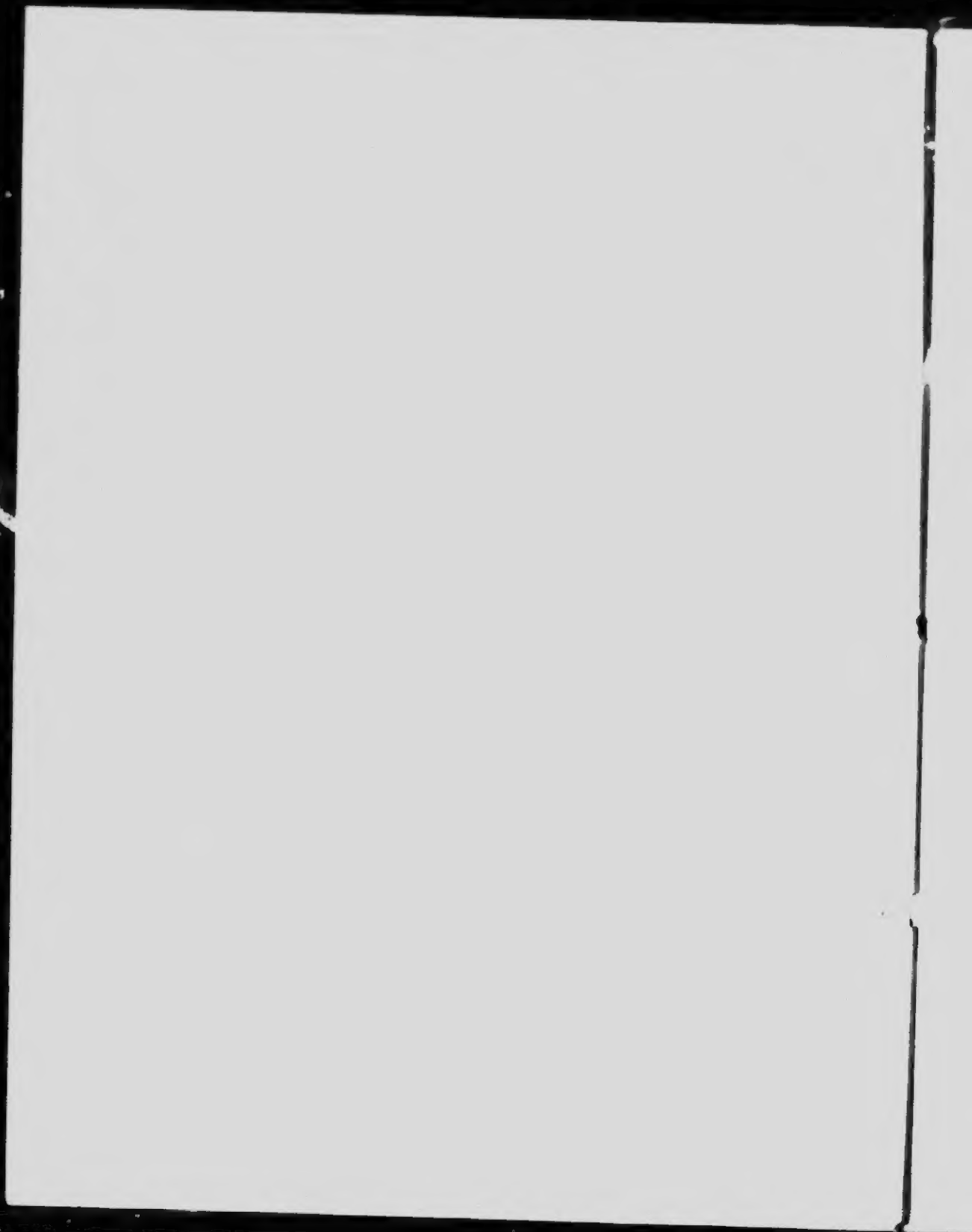
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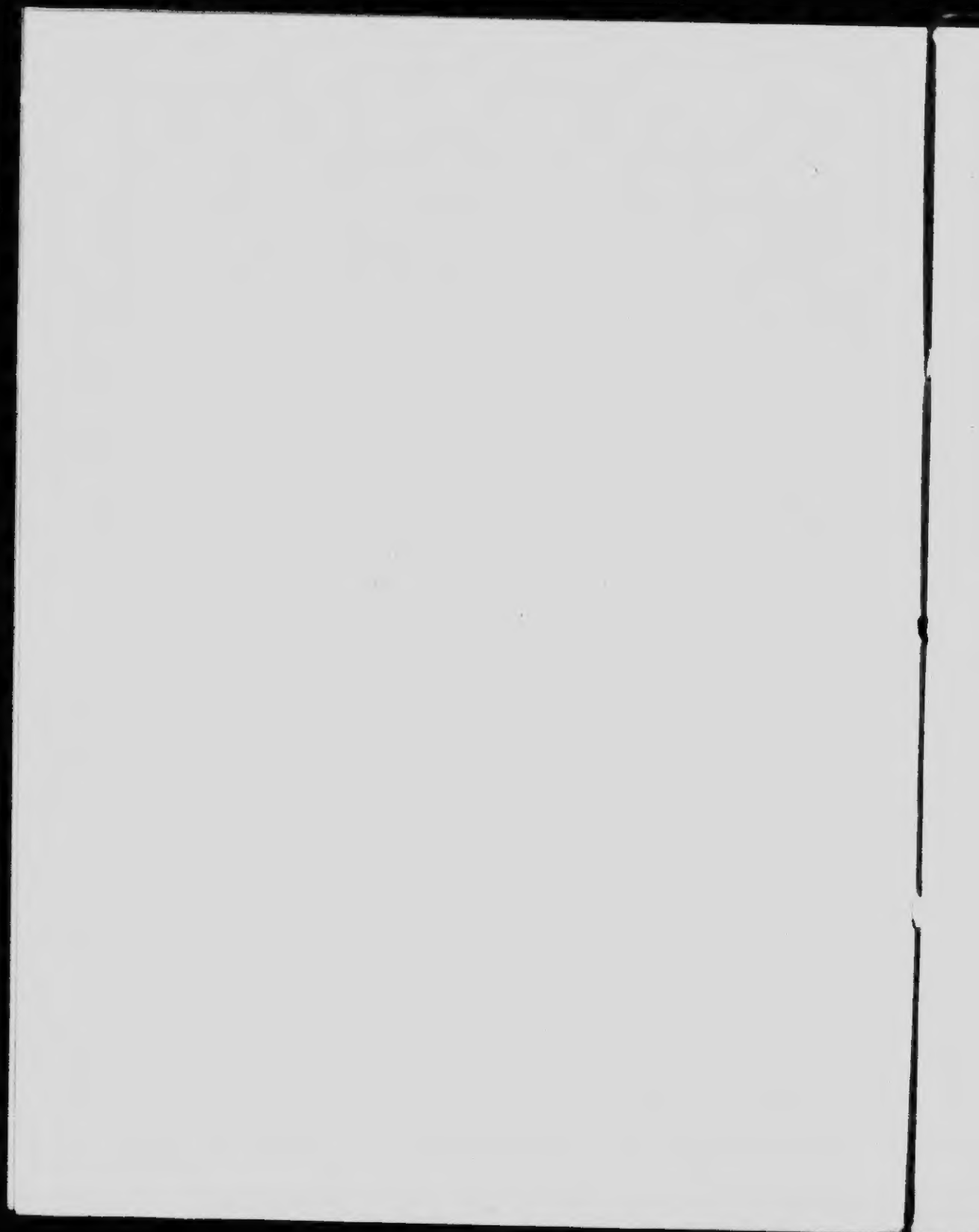
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Dedicated
with
Admiration and Confidence
to
All who have returned
from
Their Ministry in
the Great War

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*"The Angels were gone away from them into
Heaven."—St. Luke ii. 15.*



The Return of the Angels

THE angels had delivered their message. Their hymn, "Gloria in Excelsis," still throbbed upon the hills. Down on the plains the shepherds stood, mute with wonder, as they watched the shining throng wing its way up, and ever up, until it was lost to view. On sailed the heavenly host until the earth grew shadowy and vague and finally disappeared beneath a bank of clouds. Past stars and planets it flew until it reached the topmost heights of the universe. There the Eternal City stood, with gates open on every side. Light poured out through the portals until it was ensphered with brilliancy. The air was soft and warm, and a rich perfume floated around the city walls.

Folding their wings, the angels glided into the city and were welcomed by songs and alleluias that no man can utter. They were back home again! Returning from the richest experience and holiest ministry of all time, they brought

into heaven a new element. They could never be the same angels that obediently sped away to earth only a short time before. Their lives were dignified and ennobled because of their mission. A new revelation had been imparted; an unprecedented visit had been made; a glory incomparable had been shed upon them. They told the story of the wondrous Birth to their companions within the city and a fresh joy was born among them. The earth must henceforth be a familiar and beloved place because the Divine Life had entered into it. As the other angels listened to the fascinating story, they were filled with an eager desire to visit the earth. They, too, wanted to share in the joyous privilege of ministering to the sons of men. A keener interest was born among them, a quickened zeal moved them to beg permission that they might fly to the help of all who struggle and suffer on the pained and tortured earth. Thus there began a larger communication between heaven and earth. They were brought nearer to each other. Heavenly visitants were often found

hovering above the storm and stress of earth, ready to defend, succour and relieve the afflicted children of men.

It happened, many centuries afterwards, that a great war fell upon the world. The opportunity for angelic ministry was unrivalled. Throngs of white-robed messengers sped away to the scenes of suffering and death. Angels in shining armour stood before the sweeping tides of the enemy and held them back. When defeat seemed certain, the unseen host caused confusion in the ranks of the foe and filled their hearts with fear. Now and again the soldiers of Right caught a fleeting vision of their heavenly defenders and they were filled with a fresh courage. Angels of mercy visited the hospitals and brought ease and comfort to the wounded. Sometimes the half-conscious soldiers confused the nurses with the angels, but it was really not a mistake—the Spirit of Heaven moved in the hearts and souls of those who spent their strength in the relief of suffering.

Some of the angels remembered that, when the little children were massacred at Bethlehem,

it had been a gracious privilege to bear their infant souls to Paradise. Now they were engaged in a similar office. When the hideous shells tore body and soul apart, they quickly gathered up the Immortals and carried them away to the abode of the martyrs. Little angels visited the stricken and desolate cities and watched over the babes, bearing away their souls when the cruel monster of war trampled the life out of their bodies. Above the wide waters of the seas flew the messengers of God, guiding the ships into havens or lifting the souls from drowned bodies and gently bearing them to the Great Father.

Angels of Justice were busy, flying long distances to neutral nations and awakening in the hearts of the people a sense of right until the hosts of the Lord grew mighty. Over the vast continents they sped, dropping seeds of truth and justice, until nations from the West and East stood upon their feet to oppose the giant evil that walked the earth. St. Michael and his warriors were there to strengthen our armies and to defend them against superior might. St.

Gabriel and his messengers carried tidings to all the corners of the earth and kept aflame the spirit of Right and Liberty. St. Raphael gathered up the prayers of anxious relatives and bore them to the throne of God. St. Uriel carried light to those who sat in darkness and comforted them with the assurance of victory.

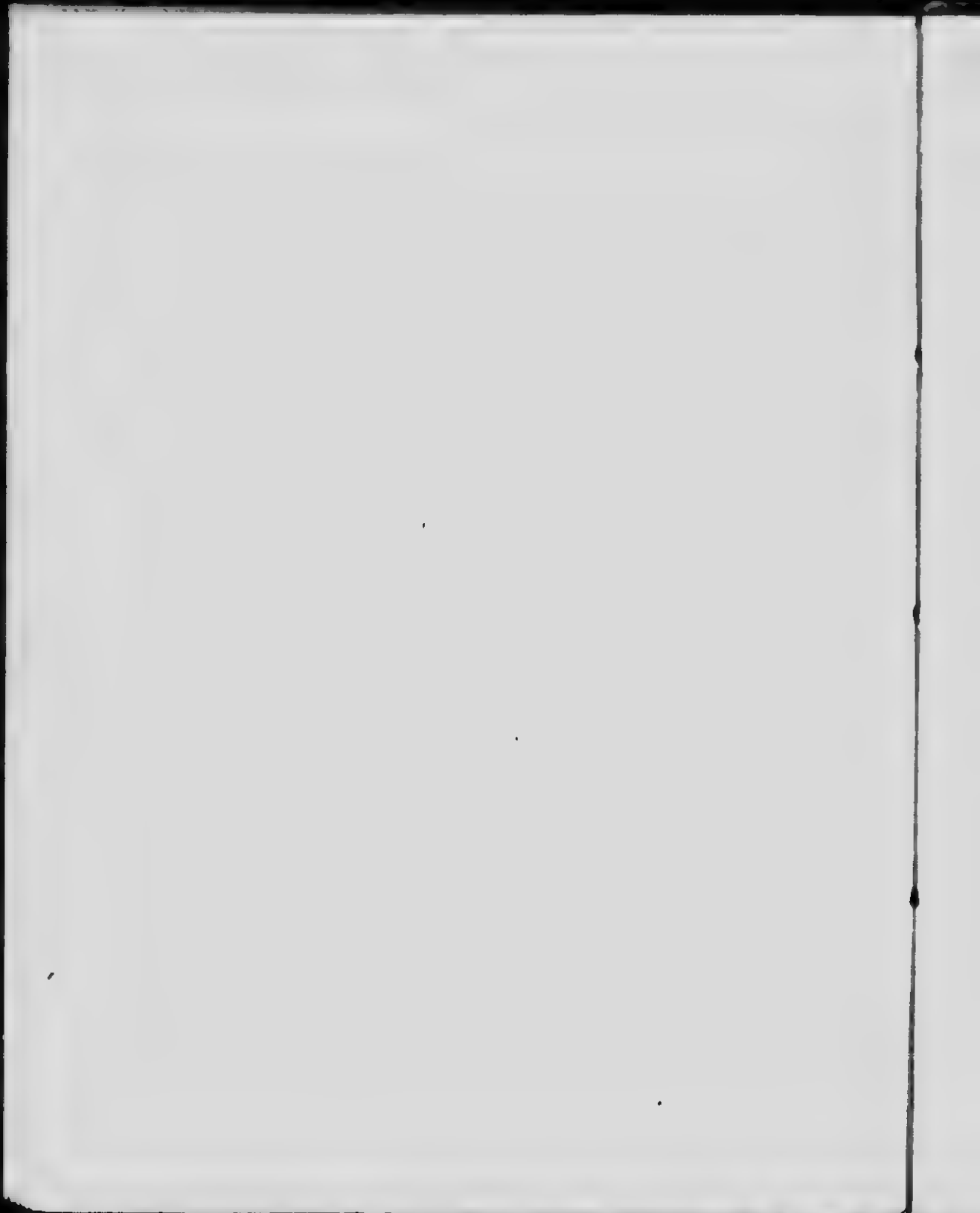
In the wonderful vision which St. John describes in the Book of Revelation, he speaks of "the angels of the churches." Theologians have their own interpretation for this phrase, but may we not read it as referring to the messengers of God who have brought a new message to the Christian communions? The angels represent spiritual powers—they are the media of divine revelation. Through the Churches, a larger interpretation of religion must be given to the world. It is impossible that we can be content with the old and narrow views. The war has sounded a new note. If heaven has been enlarged and changed because of the Christmas truth, if the angels returned from their mission with a bigger vision, may we not conclude that by the

experience of war a change must be made in the Church's presentation of her doctrine ?

Dogma is hard, theology is contentious, creeds are cold, ecclesiasticism is narrow. We need more emphasis upon the humanities ! Surely the war has made us all more tender and sympathetic. After the glorious manifestation of courage, sacrifice, endurance, comradeship, which the past five years have witnessed, it can never be possible for any denomination to indulge in anathemas, exclusions, partizanships. Sympathy and brotherliness must be the dominant notes of the Church's message. "The Angels of the Churches" have returned with a summons to more tender ministries, to an activity of compassion. In place of entrances made narrow by rigid tests of orthodoxy, she must fling her doors wide open to all who "hunger and thirst after righteousness." Instead of being a fortress, defending her ancient creeds, she must be an apostolic army, going forth to do battle against wrong, equipped for service to all the multitudes who need guidance and help.

To-day the call is urgent for the simple gospel of Christmas. Before it was overlaid with traditions, it had a compelling sound in the ears of men. Its primary truth of Christ's salvation for men has been buried beneath the accumulated dogmas and definitions of the centuries. We want the angels back! The war has brought them to earth again with their sweet and tender gospel. Let us catch its spirit and refresh ourselves in its glory before they go back to heaven again. Let us listen for the message and receive it in all its original power and beauty: "Fear not! I bring you glad tidings of great joy. For unto you is born a Saviour who is Christ the Lord.... Glory to God in the highest and on earth peace among men of good-will."

"They departed into their own country another way."—St. Matt. ii : 12.



The Return of the Magi

THE stately and mysterious figures of the wise men have always fascinated us. They lend distinction to an event which is otherwise concerned with ordinary people. We turn from the shepherds, the holiday crowd at the Feast, the soldiers, the peasant folk and all the common interests of the occasion, and fix our attention upon these dignified and strange characters. Their very mysteriousness adds immensely to their attractiveness. No one knows exactly who they were or whence they came. Tradition has clothed them with royalty and scholarship. Out from the great mystic East they come, guided by a flaming sign in the heavens. For a brief moment they appear in the crowded streets of Jerusalem, then for another moment they kneel at the feet of the Infant Christ to present their gifts, and out they go into the unknown world. They have never been heard of again. Speculation has been active all the

centuries. It is a story for the imagination. We may allow our minds full scope to play about this unique and altogether delightful event.

One thing, however, is very certain—they returned different men to their own country. The long journey, the strange experience in the Holy City, the wondrous star, the humble scene where the Babe received their homage—all these, and many other things of which we can have no knowledge, entered their lives and wrought a marvellous change. They came back to their own land robed in a new dignity, vested with increased authority. One can easily imagine the throngs of interested neighbours who waited upon them. The community had watched them depart months before and had been astonished at their strange faith in the sign. It had watched for their return with eager curiosity, and here they were back again! What tales they had to tell! The story of the new-born king would receive eloquent and solemn rehearsal at their hands. Their fellow students would be strangely moved over the account of the star, for they were all

astrologers. The little kingdoms over which they presided would be ready for the New Evangel when the missionaries pushed their way eastward. As for the Magi themselves, they would resume their studies with a fresh zest. The heavens would shine with added glory. They would always be watching for new stars. Their minds would be open for the access of new light. Never again could they be suspicious of anything which did not fall within the compass of their experiences. They were now prepared to welcome the light, no matter whence it came. They became leaders in the New Day of Revelation. A royal welcome was accorded them when they returned into their own land, bringing back with them the uplift and inspiration of the New Gospel.

The return of kings and wise men—the leaders, idealists, dreamers, star-gazers! Here is a subject worthy of the artist's brush. Out of the vast experience of the war they come back to us. What do they bring with them? Have they any new vision for us, any fresh inspiration

to guide us in these perplexing and difficult times ? One can never forget the day when King Albert of Belgium returned to Brussels after the armistice. For over four years he had been away from the capital city. He was hailed as a hero, welcomed as one who had been through all the agonies and pain of the conflict. Nor can one ever efface from his memory the day when this same heroic king came to Mons and entered the splendid cathedral to offer thanksgiving to God for the delivery of his people from captivity.

A new idea of kings was born during the war. The only sovereigns who survived the conflict were those who embraced the modern conception of kingcraft. Who does not remember with joy the acclaim of King George on Armistice night in London ? And have we not just ended our proud welcome to his son throughout Canada ? The true kings have returned to their people. Is not the gospel story significant ? "They departed into their own country *another way*." They could not return as they came—their experience had transfigured them. They must

go back over a nobler pathway. Even so have our national leaders returned from the war by another way. Had they tried to come back by the old road they would have shared the fate of the German Kaiser or the Russian Czar. Henceforth kings and their councillors must walk the more royal way of service. No haughty, arrogant lordship over the people will ever again be suffered. No king can ever again be given the power to disturb the world's peace. "Government of the people by the people for the people" is the doctrine that the war has scrolled in letters of blood across the history of nations.

But the Magi were also wise men—students of science, searchers after knowledge. What effect has the war upon the realm of education? How have all our scholars and students emerged from the disaster? Did the dreadful catastrophe wreck any of our ideals?

One day we stood by the University of Louvain—or by what was left of it. The magnificent library was a heap of ruins. Books were scattered about the streets. The wind caught up the torn

leaves and blew them through the broken walls and arches. One wondered if this might be a picture of what was happening to our ideas in education. Only very recently a public speaker charged our universities with the responsibility of the war. Whilst we cannot agree with so extreme a statement, yet we fear there is a modicum of truth in it. The fact is that all our institutions must bear a share of the blame. We need, therefore, to readjust our beliefs and ideals. University men who passed through the furnace of war have returned with altered ideas. Like the wise men, they went out with their gifts—splendid gifts they were—and they have come back with a lofty vision and a nobler purpose. Some of the old theories have been exploded with the exploding shells. Culture has received a deadly blow, for it is now apparent that a soulless system of education only makes cruelty more terrible and lust more revolting. A mere intellectual refinement, a storing of the mind with knowledge, a furnishing of the personality with arts and graces—these are not the essential

requirements. Something more is needed, a deeper, more fundamental culture! You are not getting at the real man when you have treated him as a mind any more than you are touching the true manhood by considering him as a mere animal. Man is soul—he wears a body and uses a mind; therefore he must be treated in his threefold nature, and the first of these is soul.

When the wise men returned home they carried with them the vision of Christ. That made all the difference. It revolutionized their studies; it made every star in the sky burn with a new glory. The world of ideals needs to-day the vision of Christ. Our colleges and schools will fail in their highest purpose unless they include in their programme all that the word "Christ" connotes. The principles of self-sacrifice, brotherhood, God's Fatherhood, man's divinity, the glory of immortality—these must be given a place in the training and developing of the young. Science and scholarship will remain cold and powerless until they are shot through with the passion for humanity which was revealed

to the world in the person of Jesus Christ. The kings and wise men, the dreamers and scholars, the educationalists and idealists, all need to return to the Babe of Bethlehem and offer their gifts. When those gifts are touched and consecrated by the spirit of Christmas, the Magi may go back to their own country and there perform their duties under the power and inspiration of the New-born King.

*"And the shepherds returned, glorifying and
praising God.—St. Luke ii : 20.*

The Return of the Shepherds

OF all the people associated with the Nativity, the shepherds must have been the most astonished and thrilled. They were the only persons who saw and heard the angels. It must have been a memorable night for them. The shining host of singers, the message of the angel of the Lord, the journey to the stable and the sight of the new-born Babe—these must have left an indelible impression upon their minds. Who could listen to such music as heaven alone can produce and not be transfigured by it? These common men were strangely privileged! The choir of heaven sang its anthem for them alone! To them was given the message of a world's Saviour! They were the first to look upon the Infant King!

Who were these men to whom so high a dignity was given? There seems to be a difference of opinion among scholars as to their identity. Some say that they were a very

inferior class of men, much despised because of their lowly calling, not very honest or industrious. Just the loafers of the countryside who were glad of a task that did not involve much work ! Others declare that the sheep were kept for the Temple sacrifices and that the men who watched over them would be chosen for their moral and religious characters. Whatever be the truth of the matter, they were humble men ! One can hardly believe that so peculiar an honour would be bestowed upon unworthy men. They must have been moral and upright, but they were certainly lowly in circumstance. They were at their posts of duty when the message came. One wonders what they were like when they returned to their flocks. After so rich an experience a reaction must have set in. The glory of that night would make their tasks seem very drab and dull. At first, they would wander about restlessly, trying to readjust themselves and their strange experience to their common duties. Then the new vision and power would bring a change upon their occupations. They

would do their work with a more steadfast zeal. Talking the matter over together, they would say: "We must be better shepherds because of what we have seen and heard. The commonplace has been transfigured. Did we not see the light in the stable, the rich radiance of the manger, the halo upon the Mother and Child? Have we not seen the glory of the Lord? He has shown us that our work is honourable, therefore we must do it well. We must carry our vision into our duties and be more faithful than ever before." So they "returned, glorifying and praising God" and ever afterwards they bore a reputation for fidelity, industry and cheerfulness.

The question is often asked, what kind of work will our returned men perform? Has the war unsettled and unfitted them for their tasks? Or has it given them a higher conception of duty and a more robust determination to do all things well?

The answer is not yet given. It is too soon after the conflict to indulge in any conclusions. So great an upheaval as the war must inevitably

react upon all life. Men have been in an unusual experience for more than four years. For the most part they have been young men whose habits of life are in process of formation. They have been under an iron discipline and naturally the military habit still clings. It is too much to expect that they can lay aside these habits as easily as they put off their uniforms. Ideals have undergone a change and readjustment takes time. Living a nomadic life has made them restless. They find it hard to be tied down in offices after a long habit of outdoor life. In addition to this they discover changes on their return. Things are not as they were when the boys went overseas. Some of the alterations are not pleasing—a sense of injustice prevails when they learn that the men who remained behind are the favourites of fortune. They have read stirring speeches, proclaiming the nation's appreciation of their service and sacrifice, but they do not find that these are borne out by the facts. History informs them that the soldier's bravery is soon forgotten and that among the shameful

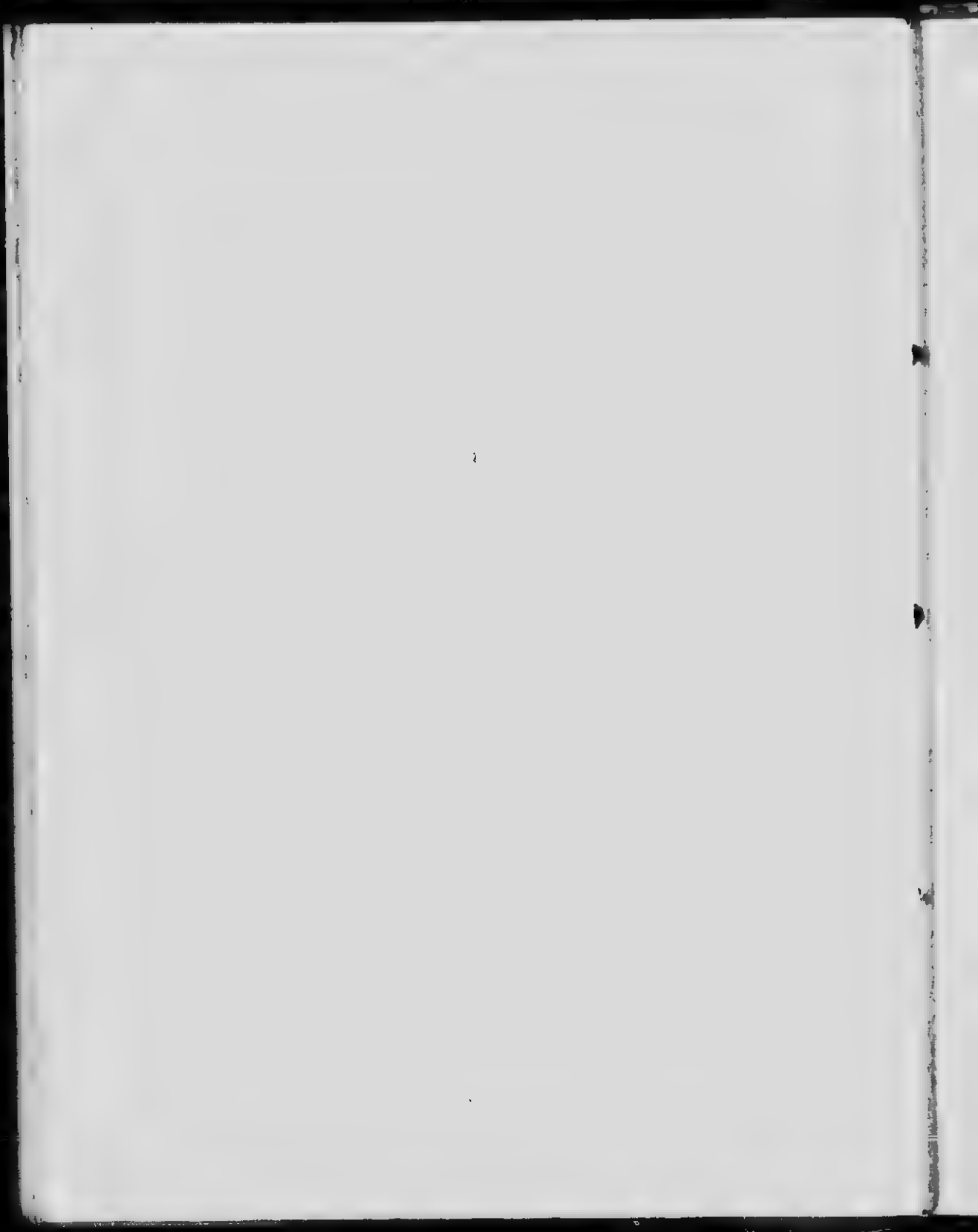
things of the past is the neglect of the country's defenders. Many things convince them that the promises of enlistment are not fulfilled, and dissatisfaction prevails. It will require time to straighten out the tangle, and in the meanwhile patience is a counsel of perfection.

But that these men will bring a new power to bear upon the tasks of Canada one cannot have any doubt. Their experience cannot fail to broaden and deepen their lives. They have learned many things during the years of war. A fine sense of brotherhood has been developed which must help to banish all forms of party strife. An impatience of social cleavages, racial barriers, creedal distinctions has been awakened. They forgot the differences of accident of birth in the great crisis! The emergency showed how little, after all, exterior advantage or circumstance was worth. They will be forever intolerant of artificial distinctions and will judge a man solely by character. It is the interior quality which counts, and upon that they will place the emphasis. They will urge with all the force of

their unique experience that the passport to recognition must be service. No titles or honours will be suffered because of wealth or influence; and perhaps the place where men will be least tolerant of rank is the Church. All lordly pomp to them is utterly out of sympathy with the Spirit of the Master.

These are among the changes that the war has wrought, and who can doubt that they are all essential to any nation's true welfare? There are plentiful signs everywhere that the people as a whole are weary unto death of the old conditions, and a new order of things will shortly be ushered in. In the New Day the returned men will take their full share of the responsibilities and discharge them in the same fine spirit that was manifested during the tragic days of war. It would be pathetic beyond words if these men, lifted to such heights of valour and sacrifice as the military records reveal, should fall back into the indifference and selfishness of five years ago. No, the whole nation has been exalted and transfigured and we must move forward to finer

achievement. There is a tradition that the shepherds of Bethlehem, whilst still pursuing their allotted vocations, became preachers of the new gospel among their brother shepherds until the whole countryside was lifted into the new kingdom of God. Perhaps our brothers from the battle front, moving in and out through the world of business in Canada, will bring the larger vision of our nation's destiny to bear upon their comrades until this wondrous land will become what the prophets of confederation designated her: "His DOMINION from sea to sea."



*"They returned into Galilee, to their own
city of Nazareth."*—St. Luke ii : 39.

The Return of the Family

WHAT a difference there was between the going out and the coming back ! When the order was issued by Cæsar Augustus "that all the world should be taxed," Joseph and Mary left their village of Nazareth and journeyed to Bethlehem, which was their own city, "being of the house and lineage of David." We can well imagine the scene of their departure. It must have been known that Mary expected her motherhood shortly. That in itself was a sufficient cause for anxiety. We are all acquainted with the interest in such an event. Friends would be concerned in her welfare and be ready with all kinds of advice. Joseph must have set out with a troubled heart, for travel in those days did not promise much comfort for his wife. They probably promised to return in a few days, for delay would be unwise. What must have been the conjecture of the villagers when days passed into weeks

and yet no sign of their return? At last the word went round that they were entering the village! Joseph and Mary were returning and bringing with them their new-born Babe. The neighbours and friends were eager to hear the story and to see the child. And what a tale there was to tell! The crowded hotels where no room was to be found and the Birth in the rude stable! The incredible stories of the angels and shepherds and the visit of the wise men! Then the flight into Egypt in order to escape the brutal massacre! The circumcision and naming of the child, the Presentation in the Temple with the tender story of aged Simeon and Anna! We can readily fancy the skepticism, the astonishment, the whispers, the faith and laughter, the joy of the community. Nazareth was lifted from obscurity into world recognition! The home of Joseph must have been the centre of attraction. As the child grew up, they treasured his every word and watched his every action. The carpenter's shop was clothed with dignity. Indeed, the whole village was robed in majesty because of the Child.

What is going to be the effect upon family and social life by the return of our men? Has the war exalted the Home and improved Society? We can be sure of one thing: that this Christmas will be a reunion of a most joyous character. Some men have been away from home for five Christmases! Can we not understand what the festival will mean for them this year? Families all over the land will be bright and gay with festivities. Fathers, husbands, sons, brothers, daughters, will be in their accustomed places again. How the home will ring with laughter! In every community there will be banquets and receptions in honour of returned heroes. The social life will be quickened everywhere! But what will be the result of this long absence? Will a new and better element come into domestic and social life? Will the return mean for the home and society what the return of Joseph and Mary and the infant Jesus meant for Nazareth?

One of the most pathetic things after Armistice Day was to watch the returning refugees. The roads were choked with the processions;

and what tragic groups they were! Ill-clad and with drawn faces, each trundling or carrying a bundle of household effects, yet all radiant with happiness because their faces were set towards home. When one passed through a desolated town or village, lonely little groups could be seen digging among the ruins in the hope of discovering some treasure of the home. What a return that was for the poor people of France and Belgium! Our men are not returning to such conditions as those. The homes are unbroken, the towns are unscarred and on all hands there are shouts of welcome. After one has attended function upon function for returned soldiers and shared in the honours and tributes heaped upon them, there lingers the question, Will the home be dignified by this experience? Beyond any doubt it will be a glorious change for the men who have lived in dug-outs, barns, huts, trenches, for all those weary months; but will family life be permanently ennobled? And will society be purged of its folly and become the gracious thing that it ought to be?

There are many things that fill us with misgiving. Perhaps it is too early to form a sound judgment. One ought to be prepared for a reaction from the barren and joyless experience of the war. Cut off for so interminable a time from the pleasures of social and domestic life, it is perhaps inevitable that there should be a measure of abandon and excess. Men will have their fling, we are told. By and by they will settle down and things will become normal. Let us hope that the rioting will not last so long that it will become a habit. There is a delirium of joy just now, a shocking immodesty of women, a perilous intemperance of social gayeties. With the crash and stupidity of jazz music, the vulgar display of wealth, the sensuous fashions in clothes, the ungraceful and voluptuous modern dance, what are we to expect in the future? Is this the sort of thing that our men fought and died for? Can we think this to be a worthy result of all the agony and heartbreak of these stormy years? Oh! men and women, for shame! Let us get out of all this frantic lust of pleasure

and seek a more worthy joy. We are fooling ourselves with all this froth and spume ! There is a deeper and more abiding content—let us find it in the truer joys that the Holy Family distributed in Nazareth. One would have hoped that the loss of home during the long war would have made it inexpressibly dear in these days of peace. Now and again there comes a cheering report that bids us hope for better things. A father said the other day that his son was a changed boy—he was so much more considerate about the home since his return ! That seemed a logical result from the war. All the horror and pain, the coarseness and unloveliness, the absence of domestic sweetness and beauty, ought to make our homes now a veritable Paradise. If there is failure in our hopes, the blame must rest largely with the people who have remained behind whilst the men were overseas. The lads have returned with changed views, with higher ideals and loftier aims. They find that those at home have not kept pace with their mental growth, and the result is painful disappointment. There is serious

dissatisfaction with the frivolous condition of society and the selfish character of domestic life. What can be done to save the situation and restore a healthy atmosphere ?

One meditates upon the recurring festival of the Nativity at Nazareth. As the Son's Birthday came round each year, there must have been a growing glory about the Carpenter's cottage. We are not told very much about the family life of Jesus, but the single glimpse we get of His boyhood, as well as the history of His mature years, provide us with guidance and inspiration. There must have been there the laughter of children, for the Master's ministry exhibits a tender familiarity with the games of youth and a passionate love of the young. The Feast in Cana of Galilee shows a sympathy with domestic joy and a sweet regard for the host. Christ was ever careful of the rules of hospitality, for we find him rebuking Simon for his forgetfulness of them. The home at Bethany leaves no doubt in our minds that He yearned for the privacy and seclusion of the home and blessed it by His

presence. There was in Him always an unselfish consideration of others, and that is the very foundation of a happy family life. His last act upon the Cross was to provide a son for His Mother and a mother for His best friend. Above all else, His thought of God was as a Father, of heaven as a home, of us all as sons. Joseph died when Jesus was a lad, but the Master's whole life and speech have left us a beautiful record of the relation He bore to His earthly father; and the unfailing gentleness He manifested towards His Mother has lifted her to a unique place among women. He was constantly revealing to His relatives higher planes of thought and action, so much so that at times He puzzled them; but ever He came back to lead them on in order that His wish might be fulfilled, "that where I am there ye may also be." All the pain and battle of His life intensified His desire to make the filial relation a holy and beautiful thing.

With these revelations in our mind, we can readily understand what His Birthday meant for the home and the community. We are sure

that the salvation of our domestic and social life depends upon the re-introduction into it of His Spirit. There is no better time for us to begin than at Christmas, for that is the Festival of the Home, the hour when family joys and the sweet intimacies of friendship have their holiest manifestation. If we make Jesus our Guest, bring back again the dear memories of childhood, sing the carols that have been consecrated by centuries of use, then this first Christmas after the war will be the Birthday of a New Era for the Home and Society.